

## TOPICS AND COMMENTS

### CONCEPTUALIZING THE STUDY OF FOLKLORE AND LITERATURE

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The recent review of **Folklore and Literature in the United States** in **Folklore Forum** indicates perhaps that certain outmoded conceptions of the study of folklore in literature still persist in American academia.<sup>1</sup> The reviewer apparently conceives of the study of folklore in literature as being exclusively concerned with identifying discrete items of folklore in literary texts. This perception of the goal of studying folklore in literature may have characterized early efforts in this field, and it may have been codified by Dorson's articulation of it in 1957 (Dorson 1957), but it certainly is no longer an appropriate or accurate conception of this discipline. In fact, such an egregious misconceptualization of the field requires an explicit and flat refutation. The goal of competent folklore in literature studies is not primarily to identify the lore in the literature. Ever since Dundes' methodological statement in "The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture" (1965), students of this field have recognized that, in theory, the ideal folklore in literature study would use an understanding of the meaning and significance of the folklore influences in a literary text to explicate that text.

This new definition of the study of folklore in literature appears to disconcert the reviewer of **Folklore and Literature in the United States**. To him it apparently encroaches upon the study of folklore and literature. A clarification of the relative methodologies and goals of these related fields may be called for. I did not offer such an overview of this discipline in the introduction

to **Folklore and Literature** because I thought that it was well understood, but apparently a further elaboration is necessary. The confusion may arise because the appellation "folklore and literature" is generally used to designate the whole complex of the interrelations of these two phenomena as well as the more specific study of their comparative forms and functions. A proper overview of this whole discipline eliminates the confusion, however.

The interrelations of folklore and literature may be logically divided into three categories: folklore's influence upon literature; literature's influence upon folklore; and their comparative form and function. The term "folklore and literature" describes all three of these areas, but it is also used to refer specifically to the last field of study. The phrase describes, in this specific use, the study of the comparative function of stylistic or narrative devices found in examples of folklore and literature for their respective audiences. These objects of comparative study are not assumed to be or examined as diachronically related through cultural contact or influence. In contrast, the study of folklore's influence upon literature, which is referred to as folklore in literature, examines the folkloric contribution (in whatever form) to a literary text in order to explicate the function and meaning of that text. To use an example from the reviewer's own research (in a paper delivered at the Nashville AFS meeting entitled "Folklore and Faulkner"), the analysis of Faulkner's use of the motif of a **Märchen** princess, as well as his use of other **Märchen** elements and style, in addition to certain generic conventions related to local legends, would all be instances of the influence of folklore upon literature. Faulkner certainly acquired his sense of these **Märchen** and local legend conventions directly or indirectly from folklore --- he did not make them up on his own coincidentally; they were not the product of polygenesis. Despite the reviewer's inclination to call this a study of folklore and literature (which it is in the most general sense of the term), it is clearly, to a large extent, a study of folklore's influence upon a literary text. The study

may also engage in some comparative analysis of the folk and literary traditions for their respective audiences, thus broadening its scope to include the study of folklore and literature in its specific sense, but it would still fall under the rubric of a folklore in literature study inasmuch as it discusses folkloric influences in Faulkner's fiction.

One of the main points of the introduction to **Folklore and Literature in the United States** is that the revised conceptualization of the study of folklore in literature greatly broadens its scope and method. When folklore is as broadly conceived of as modern folklore theory has proposed it should be, then the influence of folk tradition upon literary tradition is enormous, and the potential for fruitful analysis and insight in this area is equally great. The study of folklore in literature no longer is the outdated and outmoded search for folk cultural debris in literary documents, armchair archeologists poking through literary texts to pull out scraps of historical lore. It becomes a current and vital exegesis of the way literary texts adapt and modify folkloric traditions in order to communicate to other audiences. These traditions may range from specific motifs, such as the evil step-mother, to basic generic conventions, such as those characterizing supernatural personal experience narratives. Just because early students in the field of folklore in literature identified only obvious folklore items and neglected to analyze the significance of literature's use of folklore does not mean that the modern study of the folkloric contribution to literature by definition must concentrate only on explicit allusions and ignore broader influences, nor does it mean that it should exclude analysis of its significance. Furthermore, the limitations of the early folklore in literature studies do not forever sully the term used to describe this field of investigation. The proper term for describing the study of the folk cultural contribution to literature in all of its manifestations is "folklore in literature."

This emphasis upon folklore in literature in this discussion and in the introduction to **Folklore and Literature**

in the United States is not meant to devalue the other two categories of the interrelationship of folklore and literature. The study of literature's influence upon folklore ("literature in folklore") and of the comparative forms and functions of these two distinct cultural expressions ("folklore and literature" or "folklore compared to literature") are both equally fascinating and deserving of study. The reality that prevails, however, is that the area of folklore's influence upon literature is the most frequently studied and has the widest general interest. Accordingly, **Folklore and Literature in the United States**, while attempting to cover all three categories of the relationship of folklore and literature in America, focuses primarily on folklore in American literature, as the subtitle indicates. The inclusion of all three areas in a single bibliography, which the reviewer objects to on the grounds that it confuses the disciplines, is perfectly logical and practical. In the first place, some studies discuss more than one aspect of the relationship of folklore and literature, so the studies themselves direct our attention to the larger discipline. Moreover, these studies are all theoretically related in their focus of the study of the larger relationship, and thus they usefully inform one another. Accordingly, studies of the comparison of folklore and literature are absolutely crucial to a full appreciation of the possible extent of the influence of folklore upon literature and literature upon folklore. They contribute to a broader and more comprehensive understanding of the study of folklore in literature, a perspective that the reviewer apparently could benefit from himself.

The study that prompted this debate over the conceptions of folklore in literature versus folklore and literature attempts to catalog all the studies that usefully investigate the relationship of folklore and literature in the United States. Some relevant studies may have inadvertently been left out, but Jackson's **The Negro and His Folklore in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals** (1967) is not one. With the exception of Harris's essay, these are all studies

exclusively of folklore and not of folklore's relationship to or influence upon literature. (Harris's essay was omitted because it is not folkloristically competent nor of sufficient interest to merit inclusion.)<sup>3</sup> Similarly, other studies such as Dorson's "Oral Styles of American Folk Narrators" (1960) were excluded on the grounds that, although they provide the basis for possible comparison, they themselves do not significantly engage in such a comparison explicitly. In order to qualify as a study of folklore and literature, an investigation must overtly consider the relationship of these two phenomena, examining either their mutual influence or their comparative function.

In sum, the outdated perception of folklore in literature as a field of study still seems to have some currency, at least to the extent that it characterizes the reviewer's response to **Folklore and Literature in the United States**, and by extension the views of the editors of **Folklore Forum**. One of the stated goals of that work was and still is to eliminate these outmoded perceptions by defining more comprehensively and accurately the larger field of folklore and literature and its subdiscipline of folklore in literature. In preparing this book, I was primarily attempting to broaden literary scholars' awareness of folklore and of its extensive contribution to American literature, of which they seem woefully ignorant. I was anticipating that these literarily oriented researchers might be somewhat taken aback at my argument concerning the extent to which literature relies upon folklore, since I did not expect that they would possess a full appreciation of all that folklore is and of all that it does, nor did I expect them to be necessarily up on the current direction of folklore and literature study. I certainly did not expect that a fellow folklorist from the folkloristic heartland of America would still be anachronistically attempting to define folklore in literature studies as simply or primarily item enumeration and narrow-mindedly asserting that studies of the comparison of folklore and literature should not be included with studies of folklore's influence upon literature. Too long has the study of folklore and literature in all its various manifestations been crippled by inappropriate conceptualizations of this

field. The evidence and the argument for a new conceptualization have been clearly apparent long enough.

## Notes

1. Eric Montenyohl's review of **Folklore and Literature in the United States: An Annotated Bibliography of Studies of Folklore in American Literature** (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984) appeared in **Folklore Forum** 18 (1985): 83-84. In my opinion, the review did not give a fair and informed assessment of the overall merits and shortcomings of the book. Not only was the review flawed by the reviewer's theoretical misconceptions of the field of folklore in literature, as this essay attempts to demonstrate, but it offered only negative comments on the text, which is an incomplete assessment of the text's value, as the reviewer himself later acknowledged. In a letter to me, he stated, "Honestly, I can tell you that I should have included a paragraph which pointed out that despite my reservations about the work (the [omission of some] theses and the typos), all of which were relatively minor, it is certainly the most useful work in the field." The failure to include some recognition of this appreciation of the text's merit in the review was a crucial and unfortunate omission that resulted in an injudicious critique of the work.

2. Sandra K.D. Stahl's recent essay, "Studying Folklore in American Literature," in Richard M. Dorson, ed., **Handbook of American Folklore** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 422-433, should have made such a clarification unnecessary. Her essay intelligently discusses the wide range of relationships found between folklore and literature. She points out that the study of folklore in literature is part of a larger discipline concerned with the way that folklore and literature converge. She then goes on to point out a number of overlapping areas of interest or obvious relationship between folklore and literature, including literature in folklore, folklore as literature, and folklore in comparison to literature.

While she is primarily concerned with surveying the various ways that folklore and literature are related and with encouraging broader studies of folklore and literature, she ultimately recognizes, as I do, that 1) in past research, studying the role of folklore in literary texts has had the greatest interest, 2) in modern research, there is still a valid place for the study of folklore's influence upon literature, and 3) this study is usefully informed by an appreciation of all the implicit relationships between folklore and literature. Thus, her essay, which was coincidentally written at the same time as my study of **Folklore and Literature in the United States**, serves as a valuable justification for it and complement to it.

3. Joel Chandler Harris, "An Accidental Author," pp. 243-246. This short piece describes Harris's encounter with an eccentric preacher who thought the earth was shaped like an egg and was the center of the universe and who later contributed some other equally inventive information to newspaper accounts of Harris's biography. Harris briefly details some biographical events that led him to become a writer (such as the influence of his mother's reading to him **The Vicar of Wakefield** and his becoming an apprentice typesetter for a weekly newspaper). In three sentences he does acknowledge briefly that he learned the stories, songs, and myths that later formed the basis of his Uncle Remus stories from visiting nearby plantations and that an article from **Lippincott's Magazine** gave him his cue to write down the legends of Uncle Remus. That brief reference hardly makes the essay qualify as a competent and insightful study of folklore and literature. The essay has some minor value only from the biographical perspective of Harris's life.

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### **A Response to Barry W. Rosen's "Metamärchen: Reevaluating and Defining the Romantic Kunstmärchen"**

**Eric L. Montenyohl**

I very much enjoyed Mr. Rosen's article on German "Metamärchen" in **Forum** 18:1. There is little doubt in my mind that the authors involved chose to foreground particular stylistic and formal aspects of the **Märchen** genre in these works, thus commenting on the form itself. However, I have several other comments about other parts of the essay which I think pertinent.

First, Mr. Rosen spends several pages utilizing Max Lüthi's description of Volksmärchen (one-dimensionality, abstract style, linearity of plot, etc.) and contrasting the literary qualities of three Kunstmärchen to these qualities of Volksmärchen. In essence, Rosen indicates that the literary tales are more complex, coherent, and contain characters with greater psychological depth. As a result of this comparison, the Volksmärchen appear as appealing as a poor swineherd. Rosen admits, however, the "inherent bias here since we are judging oral literature using formal categories from written literature. The differences in the media often prevent a fair comparison; ultimately, written and oral categories have more in common than previously suspected" (21). I agree with